

Book Reviews

The Israeli-Syrian Peace Talks: 1991-1996 and Beyond

Helena Cobban

Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 1999. 235 pages.

According to Uri Savir, one of the two Israeli chief negotiators who led their country's team to the Israeli-Syrian talks in Washington, DC, in the 1990s, "there was a sense among both delegations that, if necessary, we could go on living without peace." This sense of a fallback position, engendered mainly by the absence of any urgent existential need to reach a final settlement, is what distinguishes these talks from the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations whose failure is fraught with many risks and unforeseen consequences.

Cobban's book draws on research she conducted for her 1991 book, *The Super-Powers and the Syrian-Israeli Conflict*, and her 1997 monograph, *Syria and the Peace: A Good Chance Missed*. Published and partly funded by the United States Institute of Peace, a federal institution created by Congress in 1984 to promote research on the peaceful management and resolution of international conflicts, the volume consists of eight chapters, supplemented with a forward by the president of the Institute, Richard Solomon, and a thirty-page section devoted to notes. The book contains no illustrations, photographs, appendices, or bibliographic information; however, it does offer a small map of Syria and Israel at the beginning of the book and an eight-page index section at the end.

Although somewhat overshadowed by the off-again-on-again Israeli-Palestinian talks during the 1990s, the Israeli-Syrian negotiations (propelled initially by the 1991 Madrid Peace conference) lasted a period of 52 months and, to varying degrees of enthusiasm and success, engaged three successive Israeli governments. The author offers a fascinating account of

these talks, which were shepherded almost to the end by the Clinton administration. She relies in part on the memoirs of two of the three men who led the Israeli team during these negotiations, Ambassador Itamar Rabinovich and Uri Savir, as well as an unprecedented series of interviews which were given to the *Journal of Palestine Studies* in late 1996 (published in 1997) by the head of Syria's negotiating team and its ambassador to Washington at the time, Walid al-Moallem. In addition, the author builds on documentary research and interviews she herself conducted with the three chief negotiators and with Syrian foreign minister Farouq al-Sharaa; former Israeli prime minister Shimon Peres; and the head of the U.S. "peace team," Dennis Ross.

In chapter 1, Cobban furnishes a useful background to the Israeli-Syrian talks by offering an overview of the Madrid Peace Conference, convened primarily at the behest of the US on October 30, 1991. Fruitless as the gathering itself turned out to be, it nevertheless represented the first time since Israel's establishment in 1948 that a Syrian official, Foreign Minister Farouq al-Sharaa, sat down openly with Israeli negotiators to discuss the conflict between their two countries. Chapter 2 deals with the transition from Yitzhak Shamir to Yitzhak Rabin at the helm of the Israeli government, making it amply clear that no progress in the negotiations was feasible or expected as long as Shamir's Likud party remained in power. Three more years of utter paralysis on the Syrian-Israeli track similarly ensued when Likud was returned to power under the leadership of Benjamin Netanyahu (May 1996-May 1999). Not unlike his mentor and predecessor Shamir, Netanyahu likewise touted his party's slogans of "negotiations without preconditions" and "peace for peace" in lieu of "land for peace."

Chapter 3 dwells on the slow progress of the talks following the signing of the Oslo Accords by Israel's Rabin and the PLO's Arafat on the White House lawn, in September, 1993, and the Israeli-Jordanian peace declaration in July, 1994. It was not until May of the next year that Rabin's government finally turned its attention to the Syrian track and became fully engaged in peace talks with the Syrians. The following four chapters, 4-7, represent the bulk of the study, covering the bilateral negotiations during the period of roughly one year, May 1995 to the end of May 1996. The volume concludes with a chapter entitled "The Past as Prelude," in which the author surveys the short-lived peace-making venture between the two countries and suggests that a potential Syrian-Israeli military confrontation remains likely in the years ahead.

At the opening of the 1991 Madrid Conference, President Bush [Senior] declared:

Our objective must be clear and straightforward. It is not simply to end the state of war in the Middle East and replace it with a state of non-belligerency. Rather, we seek peace, real peace. And by real peace I mean treaties. Security. Diplomatic relations. Economic relations. Trade. Investment. Cultural exchange. Even tourism.

In the Syrian–Israeli talks, held at the Wye Plantation between December 1995 and March 1996, all the issues mentioned by Bush were diligently pursued by the two delegations. In one of his interviews with the *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Ambassador Moallem stated that “75%” of the work of achieving a final agreement was accomplished there. Three years after the negotiations broke down, in June 1999, Moallem told the author:

If the opportunity comes for Syria and Lebanon, we won’t wait for a solution of the Palestinian problem—though we would continue to support the Palestinians, as the Jordanians and Egyptians have done.

It must be noted here that both the PLO and Jordan had concluded their own respective agreements with Israel without any attempt at coordination with Syria.

Until recently most observers in Israel and the West have blamed Syria’s Hafez Assad for foiling the peace effort and missing the opportunity to strike a deal with the Rabin–Peres administration – and, more recently, with the Barak government (which is beyond the scope of this study). The author maintains, though, that her analysis of the situation leads her to believe that:

It was mainly Rabin’s procrastination throughout most of his first three years in office that gave the anti-withdrawal forces the time they needed to mobilize against the effort.

Before Rabin became premier in 1992, the rhetoric from Damascus essentially reiterated the well-known Syrian formula that making peace with Israel was *khiyar istiratiji* (a strategic option), as opposed to the more urgent *al-khiyar al-istiratiji* (the strategic option). In July of that year, Secretary of State James Baker passed on the message to Rabin that he had found Assad “ready to make peace with Israel.” Analysts fault Rabin for having waited a full year to capitalize on Baker’s message and to test Assad’s intentions. When Assad finally received Rabin’s message in August 1993, expressing his willingness to consider a full withdrawal (provided his conditions were met concerning the three other “legs of the table”: security, normalization,

water rights), Assad responded almost immediately with a list of inquiries which then signaled the real beginning of the Syrian–Israeli negotiations.

In spite of this, because of Rabin’s penchant for ambiguity and secrecy, as well as his slow and carefully modulated pace, by the end of May 1995 the two sides had not yet discussed the nature of peace. Shortly before his assassination (November 4, 1995), Rabin told Israel’s Channel 2 on June 10, 1995: “I believe that the public wants peace, and whoever says that we can reach peace while preserving the entire Golan Heights or most of them is lying.” Rabin’s successor, Shimon Peres, was credited by all sides with committing himself to continuing the negotiations at a more expedited pace than Rabin. But his tenure was very brief (November 1995–May 1996) and was marred by the suspension of the talks following Israel’s military incursion into Lebanon in April 1996. Code-named Operation Grapes of Wrath, the incursion came in retaliation to Hezbollah attacks against Israel’s occupation forces in Southern Lebanon and is mostly remembered for the Israeli bombing of a United Nations base at Qana, which killed more than 100 civilians who had sought shelter there.

Throughout the negotiation process, Israel is revealed as the stronger party by virtue of its control of the land as well as the unwavering support bestowed on it by the US, the only remaining superpower. Syria, on the other hand, brings to the table such important assets as its influence over Lebanon, its close coordination with Egypt, and its close ties with Saudi Arabia and the other members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). To those assets also can be added a close relationship with Iran, and Syria’s ability to alleviate Israel’s strategic concerns over that country (which is viewed by Israel as a Syrian ally).

The Israeli–Syrian Peace Talks is a valuable study that helps document the first important steps on the road to conflict resolution between two states which have been officially at war with each other for the past half century. As well as representing a necessary addition to the fairly limited corpus of research on this vital issue, it certainly offers extremely useful lessons with regard to what worked and what did not work in this particular endeavor. In future editions, however, the volume could benefit greatly from the inclusion of a few more relevant maps and a much-needed chronology of events.

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